



Kindergarten reform: It takes a village

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Besides developing teaching and learning resources as well as best practices, there are other factors to consider in attempting to raise the overall standards of pre-school education in Singapore.

Many childcare centres and kindergartens here operate according to the recommended teacher-child ratio given by the Ministry of Education (MOE) or the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), which is based on the age of the children.

Some do it to maximise profits, others because of a shortage of teachers. I believe this ratio was created initially to cater to a teacher-directed approach in early childhood (EC) education. However, even though the training in EC institutions has since been changed to a child-centred approach, the ratio remains unchanged.

This poses a great challenge for trained teachers in such pre-schools to implement what they learned. And when they cannot stand the stress anymore, they move to other industries or pre-schools with a better teacher-child ratio.

If parents have difficulty taking care of two children below six years of age, is it realistic to expect one teacher to take care of 25 six-year-olds at one go? A good ratio would be 1:6 for 3-year-olds, 1:8 for 4-year-olds, 1:12 for 5-year-olds and 1:15 for 6-year-olds; as opposed to the current 1:12; 1:15; 1:20; 1:25 respectively.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The low salaries and status of EC educators is a key hurdle. The problem, in my view, is not that there are not enough qualified teachers out there, but that many are waiting for prospects to improve before entering the industry.

With the increased funding for the sector over the next five years, I hope a few things can be done. First, have a nationalised salary scale (similar to that for social workers) for EC educators, with the Government subsidising a portion of the salary, a la the Wage Credit Scheme.

Operators can have the flexibility to provide a variable bonus, based on performance and centre profits, to attract and retain good teachers.

Second, set up a centralised training institute for EC professionals, taught by a faculty of academics and practitioners in the EC field.

And third, give subsidies to all mothers who send their children to pre-schools, regardless of their employment status and type of pre-school. Currently, subsidies are only given to those whose children are in childcare centres and PCF kindergartens.

There is an urgent need to attract trained EC teachers into the sector. By simply lowering the ratio, the quality of teaching will vastly improve. Teachers will be less stressed because they have fewer portfolios and reports to update.

They can spend more time with each child under their charge. This will lead to better work-life balance, happier teachers and lower turnover.

STOP 'OVER-TEACHING'

I do not think that nationalising early childhood education in Singapore by having a standardised curriculum will help to ensure that all pre-schoolers start on an equal footing when they reach Primary 1. This is because we cannot stop the better-off parents from sending their children to enrichment centres.

Rather, a better approach might be to make P1 and P2 the transition period from pre-school to primary school. Since the curriculum is already standardised for P1 and P2, the ministry can assure parents that even though their children might have only one year or less of pre-school education, the primary schools will ensure that they level up by the end of P2.

This would reduce parents' anxiety to go to lengths to get their children ready for P1. This will also allow the pre-schools to really focus on social emotional development and character building in the early years. Pre-schools will not be pressured to offer an "over-teaching" curriculum to attract enrolment.

The MOE has done well in developing a curriculum framework for kindergartens. They should go further by specifying what is considered over-teaching for pre-school level, such as spelling of non-phonetic words and learning Hanyu Pinyin. To ensure schools do not over-teach, this should be included as one of the criteria under the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework.

A related problem is that in P1, popular schools seem to expect more and do more for their students. Some schools conduct various tests during P1 orientation to segregate students according to their abilities. Such practices undermine the implementation of the kindergarten curriculum framework, and make parents anxious about the readiness of their children for formal education.

MOE should outlaw such practices so that pre-schools can follow the framework and focus on character building, develop self-confidence and social skills in our pre-schoolers, among others.

SETTING ADMISSION CRITERIA

Some are calling for the ministry to reserve 20 per cent of the places in the MOE kindergartens for children from lower-income families. I would argue for 100 per cent, and that places be first offered to children from the lowest income group.

Parents with higher household income should not feel that it is unfair because they can afford to pay for other kindergartens and, as such, they should not try and compete for the limited vacancies. A parallel case is when free textbooks were given out a few years ago, and there were parents driving cars who rushed for the textbooks — which were meant to help those who could not afford new ones.

Parents who can afford to pay kindergarten fees can help poorer families by not competing for limited vacancies. This is an act of graciousness.

Overall, I am excited about the upcoming changes to the EC industry. But in order for real improvements to take hold, all stakeholders must play their part. Operators must not sacrifice quality for profits. Parents must understand their children's strengths and weaknesses and resist sending them to enrichment classes. Teachers must do what it takes to cultivate children's love for learning. The Government must support teacher training and remuneration.

If we work together, we can lay the proper foundation for our future generation.

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